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SUBJECT: LAO GOVERNMENT ALLOWS BLANKET OVERFLIGHT CLEARANCES FOR  
BURMA RELIEF FLIGHTS

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Reversing a 33-year-old policy, Lao officials notified the Embassy on May 19 that they would grant blanket overflight clearances for U.S. planes providing humanitarian support for Burma. This is another in a series of positive developments in U.S.-Lao military-to-military ties. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) On May 19, the DCM and the casualty resolution specialist at Detachment 3 of the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC), which serves as the mission's liaison with the Government of Laos (GOL) on overflight clearances, called on Ministry of Foreign Affairs Americas Division Director Thieng Boupha to request that the GOL grant blanket overflight clearance to U.S. planes on relief missions to Burma. This followed a request to the Embassy from Hickam Air Force Base in Honolulu. Mr. Thieng's immediate response was negative. He said that, as has been the policy in the past, including during relief efforts in Bangladesh in late 2007, the GOL would expedite individual clearances but would not issue a blanket clearance. The DCM requested that he convey the request in any case. Shortly after the meeting, Mr. Thieng called the Embassy and asked for a written request, which the Embassy conveyed via diplomatic note. On May 19, JPAC received blanket overflight clearance for C-17s and C-130s traveling to Burma on humanitarian support missions between May 19 and May 31.

¶3. (SBU) Comment: This unexpected decision is the latest in a series of positive developments in U.S.-Lao military-to-military relations in the past year. Since the Lao government proposed an exchange of defense attaches in June 2008, reversing longstanding opposition, cooperation has moved forward quickly. Other breakthroughs have included the GOL's participation in PACOM's Chiefs of Defense Conference, two subject matter expert exchanges on avian influenza, and cooperation on English language training for Lao military officers. End comment.

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